



# Select Committee on Communications and Digital

## Uncorrected oral evidence: The future of journalism

Tuesday 14 July 2020

4 pm

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Gilbert of Panteg (The Chair); Lord Allen of Kensington; Baroness Bull; Baroness Buscombe; Viscount Colville of Culross; Baroness Grender; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness McIntosh of Hudnall; Baroness Meyer; Lord Storey; The Lord Bishop of Worcester.

Evidence Session No. 21

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 181 - 187

### Witnesses

[I](#): Jamie Angus, Director, World Service Group, BBC; David Jordan, Director, Editorial Policy and Standards, BBC; Anna Mallett, Chief Executive Officer, ITN.

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## Examination of witnesses

Jamie Angus, David Jordan and Anna Mallett.

Q181 **The Chair:** Our next witnesses are from the BBC and Channel 4. I think they have been listening in to the last evidence session, where we discussed a number of issues that we will now ask them to talk about.

Thank you all very much for joining us. This session is being broadcast and a transcript will be taken. Our witnesses are Jamie Angus and David Jordan of the BBC—Jamie Angus leads World Service Group and David Jordan is the director of editorial policy and standards—and Anna Mallett, who is chief executive of ITN, which produces news for Channel 4, Channel 5 and other broadcasters.

Thank you all very much for joining us and giving us your time. When it comes to answering questions, in the case of the BBC perhaps you could choose between you the most appropriate person to respond, and if the additional witness has anything to add please do so.

I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves briefly and tell us a bit about their organisation and their role within it, and to give a quick overview of the impact they think coronavirus is having on their organisations, both commercially and in the way news is being consumed. We will then move on to a wider range of questions.

Let us start with Anna Mallett. Please introduce yourself give us your reaction to the impact of Covid on your industry.

**Anna Mallett:** Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts with the Committee today. I am the chief executive officer of ITN. I have been in the role for the last 15 months, but sometimes it feels a bit longer, given everything that has been going on of late. Prior to that, I was at the BBC for 13 years, working in strategy, studios and production.

ITN is a UK-based award-winning television production company. We provide news to all the commercial public service broadcasters: ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5. To that extent, we are a somewhat unique organisation. We produce bespoke news for each of our broadcast clients, spanning domestic, international and breaking news and of course in-depth investigations. However, while there is a clear editorial divide between each service, there are benefits that we bring in economies of scale in our infrastructure and operations. To give you a sense of our scale, ITN employs around 750 staff, including 320 journalists, and we feel that we are very important in contributing to the plurality of public service news provision, which obviously is very important for a democratic society. We are a small company, but we like to feel that we punch above our weight. Our three broadcast services are consumed by almost 70% of the British population.

In answer to your question about the medium-term to long-term effects of the pandemic on the UK news industry, I will focus primarily on broadcast news, because that is our area. In short, the pandemic has emphasised the importance of trusted, regulated news, but it has also

accelerated a number of trends in platform funding and operations that could have a profound impact on the future of news in the UK if not carefully considered.

First, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of public service news, and ITN has played a public and vital role in that in getting across public health messages quickly, accurately and reliably. We have analysed and clarified the Government's strategy and position. We have asked the difficult questions, but where necessary we have obviously never let the interrogation drown out the message.

We have been really intent on getting to the heart of all sorts of communities across the UK. I think you will be aware that that we have seen record audience figures for our news services. For example, ITV's "News at Ten" recorded an average share of 13% in April, its highest level since current records began in 2011. Channel 4 News grew its share 20% year-on-year for the period to the end of April, with its 16-to-34 share up almost 50%. We have also seen ITN services score very highly when it comes to trust. A number of surveys, including by Ofcom and Reuters, ranked us as equal to, and in some cases ahead of, the BBC.

In terms of the impact of Covid-19, there are three somewhat interrelated impacts to talk about. The first is the move from linear to digital platforms and the rise of fake news. It has been absolutely fascinating to see the resurgence of viewing of TV news, and I am optimistic about the importance of linear news for many years to come. It is clear that audiences value that, but it is also clear that they will want to receive news in a variety of different ways on different platforms on different devices and at different times, and this will accelerate.

At ITN we have embraced that as an opportunity. "Channel 4 News" is the biggest online individual news programme, with 200 million viewers of "Channel 4 News" on digital platforms. "ITV News" has also been very innovative: "The Rundown" was invited on to Snapchat Discover and has hit over 37 million views from March to May.

However, during the pandemic we have also seen an acceleration in viewing online and a wave of disinformation and consumer hoaxes. This has posed a real risk to the health of our citizens, our economy and our democracy. Crucially, fake news can actually undermine the response of the public authorities and weaken health measures. We see this as part of a wider trend of unregulated and unreliable news sources on digital platforms, and currently there is no value to platforms in providing quality news; indeed, fake news that goes viral may ironically be of more value. We believe that intervention is required to rebalance this.

The second implication is commercial. Unfortunately, the increase in viewing has not translated into financial benefits. I know this Committee has heard about the impacts on advertising. We are concerned that this is a more structural shift away from advertising, and that could profoundly impact public service broadcasters, on which ITN depends. If ITN is

impacted, that will of course impact the plurality of regulated, impartial news.

Finally, there has been quite a profound operational impact. I am incredibly proud of how all the teams at ITN pulled together to continue to provide the news throughout the pandemic. There has been a generational jump in how we work from home, edit off-base, transfer picture in and out of the building and broadcast from people's front rooms. We have seen a lot of innovation, and a lot of that innovation will stay with us. It has made clear how important technology and innovation are to our industry.

Given all those implications, we believe that now is the time for the Government to take concerted action to protect the future of public service broadcasting by reiterating its purpose and strengthening its business model, and to bring more stringent measures when it comes to the unregulated social media platforms. In our response, we made clear a number of possible interventions. I will not go through them all, but they include supporting the PSBs' call for legislation to update the Communications Act 2003, kite-marking, a new code of conduct and so on. Only by taking action now do we think we can ensure quality regulated journalism in future.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That was quite comprehensive. We will want to pick up on some of the issues, and others are beyond our immediate remit but none the less are of interest. Let us move on to the BBC. Jamie Angus, do you want to introduce yourself and give us your perspective? Then we will ask David Jordan.

**Jamie Angus:** Thank you for inviting me. I send apologies on behalf of Fran Unsworth, the director of BBC News, who could not join you today. I am the director of the BBC World Service Group, which covers all the international news that we broadcast outside the UK on TV, radio and online. Prior to this I was the editor of the "Today" programme and I have held a number of senior editorial positions in BBC News both on the domestic-facing side and on the international part of the operation.

I concur with pretty much everything that Anna has said. She has given an excellent overview that maps very well on to ours. I would characterise it as "Audiences up, trust up, fake news up and revenues down", and Anna pretty much spelled that out as well. I shall unpack some of what is going on that we have observed.

I agree with her absolutely that it has been fascinating to see linear audiences in the UK coming together around major events in an almost unprecedented way. That sense of coming together as a country for a specific story and specific bits of editorial content really fulfils one of the things that PSBs are here to do. I think of some of the extraordinary eyewitness reporting that we and others have done—for example, Clive Myrie's extraordinary work in reporting on the Royal London Hospital, which we were able to turn into a half-hour programme for broadcast around the world on "BBC World News".

I am sure that like everyone else, on that Bank Holiday Monday you and your families probably joined to watch the extraordinary televised press conference with Dominic Cummings from the rose garden at No. 10. These are moments that we thought we might not see again. There has been an extraordinary rise in audiences both for linear output here in the UK and on our digital platforms. I should say that at the World Service we have seen an unprecedented growth, particularly in digital news consumption, outside the UK with audiences many multiples higher than they would normally be, often for quite basic explainer information—basic video information explaining aspects of Covid that cannot be found from a trusted provider in national and regional markets outside the UK.

The question of trust is very important, and we continue to enjoy very high levels of trust among our audiences. We see trust in the TV news bulletin remaining at well over 80%. When asked, around 62% of the country will volunteer the BBC news as their most trusted source of information, so that has been a very important upside.

The fake news and disinformation phenomenon that Anna referenced has been extremely worrying, but it certainly predates this crisis. Some of the work that we have been doing at the World Service had already identified health disinformation as one of the most critical challenges in a global threat to societies that do not enjoy high levels of media literacy. We had already done some work at the World Service Group looking at anti-vaccination fake news around the world.

That trend has only become more apparent and dangerous, particularly when you consider that some of the most toxic forms of fake news and disinformation are being pushed not even necessarily by state actors but by international and even world leaders such as President Bolsonaro, President Trump and others, as well as international celebrities who are pushing a variety of fake news topics to do with 5G, George Soros and you name it.

That has been a particular strategic turn for us where we have felt the need both globally and here in the UK to turn more of our activities towards that. I should say here that the BBC enjoys a leading role on this both as the convener of the Trusted News Initiative, which is a unique way for quality news providers and a number of the tech platforms to operate as a kind of early warning system to deal with particularly troubling bits of fake news. I can give a very vivid example of this. I am part of the BBC News disinformation group WhatsApp group and we were able to see in real time, a long time before anyone else, the 5G conspiracy theories starting to build in local Facebook groups and other areas across the country. We were able to publish and challenge that story a lot earlier than we would otherwise have been able to, and to ask the tech platforms to help to take that information down in a timely fashion.

Lastly, on revenues, David Jordan will probably want to add something on the licence fee side. We run a series of commercial subsidiaries—BBC News alone has an important commercial subsidiary, BBC Global News

Ltd, which monetises BBC news content outside the UK. Those revenues support entirely the operation of the BBC World News channel and BBC.com. Like Anna, we have seen an extremely damaging and troubling hit to revenues globally.

There is some sense that they will return over time, but the deep V-shaped trough left by the disappearance of those revenues is a huge problem even for the commercially funded parts of BBC News outside the UK, let alone for other commercial competitors. As I am sure David will explain, we have also seen some worrying damage on the licence fee side. The BBC clearly enjoys a privileged position with its funding mechanism, but the threat of a downside from Covid in that respect is considerable.

**The Chair:** You have said that your audiences are up, and Anna gave us some audience numbers for Channel 4 News and other organisations; I think she referred to audience numbers up to 20 April. Briefly in your view, were audiences up in March and April, and did they stay up through May, June and July or have they receded?

**Jamie Angus:** I think they have been pretty resilient in the UK. Clearly they fell off from an almost unprecedented peak in late March and early April—around the actual moments of lockdown, I think it would be fair to say. I imagine that Anna would have a similar view. They have remained pretty resilient, particularly for domestic TV bulletins and online. They are now starting to fall away a little as we move into the summer, so one question we need to ask ourselves is how much of that enormous audience spike we will retain over time. That is something that we think about in the UK and of course outside.

**Anna Mallett:** I concur that they have receded from those peaks. However, they are still up year on year.

**The Chair:** Okay. We might explore later the overall increase in your audiences as they stabilise and the increase in export audiences. We will come back to that a bit later.

David Jordan, you are responsible for ensuring the impartiality of the BBC and editorial standards across the board, among other things. Welcome.

**David Jordan:** Yes, I am director of editorial policy and standards. That means that my primary role, together with my team, is to try to ensure that all BBC content and programmes on TV, radio and online in the UK and across the world are produced in accordance with the BBC's editorial guidelines. As you rightly say, the role includes the impartiality issue.

I also sit on the BBC's executive committee. In that context, while we have been more protected from the implications of Covid than our colleagues in the commercial PSB sector, we have not been invulnerable. We have the base of the licence fee to support us, for which we are enormously grateful, but that has taken some hits as a consequence of the Covid situation. We defer to the implementation of the fee to the

over-75s, but we have also had some evidence of people having difficulty in paying in both senses of the term: they are having more difficulty because of their financial circumstances, but also because of the lack of ways to pay which they would perhaps have utilised in the past.

We have had some issues on that side of things. As Jamie mentioned, we also have some commercial services, not just those run by BBC News but also BBC Studios, formerly BBC Worldwide. It runs a number of channels and produces programmes not only for the BBC but for the wider broadcasting community. On both those fronts, we have seen not only hits on our ability to produce programming—the same thing has happened to ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and so on—and therefore to get revenues from that, but a decline in advertising revenue on the channels that we run in the UK and across the world.

There has been an impact, which is why, on top of the reduction in the BBC's income from the licence fee of about 25% over the period when it was frozen, and on top of the £800 million in savings that we were going to make during this licence period, we have had to find another £125 million in short order to get us over the issues that have arisen with short-term funding as a consequence of the situation in which we find ourselves.

As I say, I do not want to compare our dilemmas with those faced by Anna and her colleagues in the commercial sector, because they are very different, but it would be wrong to imagine that the BBC has been invulnerable to these issues.

**The Chair:** Let us move on. We started this inquiry before Covid hit, and the focus of the inquiry is of course on the future of journalism in broadcast and other news media organisations. Some of the headwinds and issues facing the industry have been accelerated and made worse by Covid, but they are still long-term issues, and that is what we want to focus our questioning on now. The next question comes from Baroness Bull.

Q182 **Baroness Bull:** Thank you for your opening remarks. I am interested in the diversity of the sector and the recruitment, retention and career progression among people from underrepresented backgrounds. There is often a tendency to develop approaches that put the onus on the individual to solve this problem and to be a totem for that change, which is of course a huge pressure.

We have heard further evidence in this inquiry of systemic barriers to diversity within the profession. We have heard about the overreliance on university graduates as a source of workers, informal recruitment processes—the “who you know” culture—the London-centric nature of the profession, and the lack of representation, which of course fails to encourage young people from seeing themselves in it.

We have heard from organisations about what they are doing to address this, but we are keen to hear from you about how public policy can help to remove these systemic barriers to inclusion. One of the things that

Anna might like to focus on is why apprenticeships are not working. ITN mentioned this in its submission, so perhaps Anna might pick up on that aspect. More broadly, I am keen to hear from all of you about what public policy can do to address this entrenched and wicked problem.

**The Chair:** Please focus on public policy in answering this question.

**Anna Mallett:** I am glad to answer this question, because as an industry we absolutely need to maintain our energy and our commitment to ensuring that we bring people from underrepresented backgrounds into news at all levels of seniority on and off screen. That is not a box-ticking exercise; it is vital to our creativity and so that we can reflect audiences right across the UK.

You have asked me to focus on public policy rather than on the measures that we are putting in place at ITN, but I want to emphasise that we take them very seriously. The tragic death of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter has accelerated plans in many companies. We are included in that, and we will shortly publish a very comprehensive action plan focused on looking at the recruitment and retention of people from diverse groups. From a policy perspective, we welcome the recent announcement by Rishi Sunak about the Kickstart Scheme and we will look at it carefully.

On the apprenticeship levy, we support its intention, but we would like a review of it to bring in some greater flexibility. Our understanding is that a lot of the funding from that levy does not actually get spent, so we would want to build in a mechanism whereby it could be invested to meet specific industry-defined training needs. The short answer is that we need more flexibility in the scheme. We think that is the way to boost diversity along with lifelong learning, not just learning at entry level.

One of our recommendations is to think about shorter-term commitments instead of the 12 months. We work with a lot of freelancers in journalism and that would speak to that. We would like to have a bit more flexibility in managing the fund ourselves to make sure that it is spent on the most impactful things. Shorter, more bite-sized training opportunities for existing staff would be much more practical for us to bring into all our different newsrooms rather than longer training.

One of the barriers that we have found to bringing in people of different backgrounds from across the UK is the cost of accommodation. If we could use some of the levy to help with that, it would have a huge impact. While we support the ambition of the levy, we need a bit more flexibility, given that we know the dynamics of our newsrooms and our organisation and how we can progress people by using it in slightly different ways.

**Baroness Bull:** David, do you want to pick up on the policy question?

**David Jordan:** I will leave this one to Jamie.

**Jamie Angus:** Thanks, David. Anna has covered a lot of this. We agree that there are enormous entry-level barriers to journalism as a career

because of oversupply and because many organisations are contracting in real terms, which very much decreases the number of new joiners who in normal circumstances we would be able to take into the business.

I will mention a couple of things. We run three national training schemes, at least one of which, the Digital Journalism Apprenticeship scheme, is for non-university graduates. It is very regional and allows people to join the scheme, study and work for the BBC in their home regions, taking advantage of the BBC's geographical distribution around the country.

I would add to that the importance of thinking about geographical diversity as well as BAME and gender diversity. One thing that the BBC can uniquely offer at scale is the commitment to deliver more than 50% of our staff working outside London, as we have done. The director-general—and the future director-general, I am sure—will only want to push that even further. The ability to have diversity of thought and opinion within the organisation based on regional diversity is really important.

On the public policy question, we share the concern of others about the apprenticeship levy being extended to graduates in some cases. We would like to see public policy continue particularly to support apprenticeships other than at graduate level, because, as has been observed elsewhere, graduates are able to access media organisations more effectively by their own devices.

**Baroness Bull:** You did not mention socioeconomic diversity and barriers to progression. Of course, those may sit within the organisation rather than within policy, but I am interested to note that neither of you have pushed us on any additional policies beyond the apprenticeship levy. That puts the pressure back on to the organisations to address uniquely a problem that we believe goes far deeper across society. Is there really nothing that you would like to see us recommend in this report beyond the question of apprenticeships?

**Jamie Angus:** I am interested in what Anna and David will say, but we hold ourselves to our own high internal standards on reaching those levels of diversity. The critical issue for us is maintaining a journalism sector large and vibrant enough for us to continue to hire at scale and make a meaningful contribution. Some 31% of members in the apprenticeship talent schemes at the BBC come from a BAME background. The key thing for us is to be able to continue operating at scale and in that way to pull meaningful numbers into the organisation

**Baroness Bull:** It seems to us that you are not given a level playing field on which to recruit. In a sense, you are trying to do that with one hand tied behind your back. Anna, perhaps you will tell me that that is not the case.

**Anna Mallett:** We take very seriously, as does the BBC, the importance of thinking about recruitment—and progression, because it is not just

about representation but about representation at the senior decision-making levels.

On recruitment, we are looking at what we can do to reach out to schools. We had a whole plan ready that we have had to pause because of Covid, but we will get back to it. As an organisation, we are mandating balanced shortlists and diverse interview panels. We support work experience through a number of schemes like the Breaking into News initiative. We have a trainee journalist scheme and we work with lots of external partners, so we really are putting an emphasis on recruiting at very diverse levels, and we are making some progress on representation at ITN.

It is also important to say a little more on progression. We want to give people the opportunity to develop their careers, but sometimes roles do not become available at the very senior levels. However, that is not a good enough answer, so we are looking at developing acting-up schemes and mentoring for people to build their experience so that when opportunities emerge they will have the relevant experience to move into them.

I want to mention something that we see as a bit of a risk. In the past, we saw people progress from local newspapers into our business. Local newspapers did quite well at bringing in and training people in the skills of journalism. Clearly, with all that is happening in that sector, focusing on apprenticeships and bringing people in in different ways will be ever more important.

**The Chair:** I think you will have seen the previous session with the Minister of State. We raised with him a wide range of issues of diversity, including the issue of diversity of thought in newsrooms. Let us turn to that subject next.

Q183 **Baroness Buscombe:** Obviously many of us believe that diversity of thought is critical in news organisations, but there is a huge question mark, is there not? The Minister was pretty punchy on this a few moments ago, and I would like to follow in his footsteps, in the sense that there is a deep concern among many people that there is a lack of diversity of thought in newsrooms.

Olivia Crellin, the co-founder of PressPad, suggested that there is a problem with the culture in news organisations such that journalists do not feel confident to dissent from the majority view. It is said that everyone at the BBC reads the *Guardian*, but actually the *Guardian* has a tiny circulation—I think the readership is now less than the *Spectator* magazine. Yet the BBC is joined with the *Guardian* at the hip, and so much of what we read in the *Guardian* is transferred straight into the news. We also heard from John Humphrys, who recently wrote about a form of institutional bias leading to a groupthink mentality.

Anna, you talked about plurality of news, which in a sense is part and parcel of diversity of thought. I look to what Oliver Dowden said recently at Enders: "The BBC needs to be closer to, and understand the

perspectives of, the whole of the United Kingdom and avoid providing a narrow urban outlook. By this, I don't just mean getting authentic and diverse voices on and off the screen—although of course this is important—but also making sure there is genuine diversity of thought and experience ... because if you don't have that, you miss what's important to people". Do you agree with Oliver, and can you rebut some of the suggestions that I have put to you?

**David Jordan:** I think you pose a very important challenge to us, as did the Minister before you and as did the Secretary of State in his speech. We have been conscious for a long time that we need to avoid precisely the dangers that you have laid out. I am not talking about reading the *Guardian*, incidentally; I think you would be quite refreshed by the range and number of different newspapers that are consumed in the newsroom and elsewhere, so that is not a criticism that I would accept.

However, making sure that we do not have what you describe as groupthink, a single agenda determined by the backgrounds of people who work in the newsroom, and that we have diversity in that regard, is a very important question that we are constantly thinking about and addressing.

Jamie has already talked about one of the ways that we are doing that: trying to ensure that we have diversity in recruitment to our newsrooms, not just in London but across the UK. We have a significant newsroom in Salford, for example. We disperse our news provision across the UK. I am not talking about our global news provision, which Jamie will talk about if you need him to, but about our UK operation. We are dispersing, and we have a very dispersed set of journalists across the UK, more dispersed than any other organisation in the UK, given our regional newsrooms, our local journalism and our journalism in each of the nations, and we make use of that. We ensure that the backgrounds of the people who come into our newsroom are varied. That is one way in which you can approach this issue, and we are taking that very seriously.

However, there is another way in which we can approach it, and that is to try to make sure, as I did when I was an editor, that everybody who comes into work in the morning supplies their diverse experience of life to the newsroom so that they do not submit to groupthink but, rather, display curiosity—if I may put it like that—about how other people think and what is concerning other people who are not in their immediate circles and they get out and find out their views on things. They should also—this is obvious—leave their prejudices and opinions at the door. That is extraordinarily important so that we make sure that we are taking on board a full range of people's views across the UK.

Have we always been successful in doing that? No, candidly, we have not. I know am not the first person from the BBC to say this; the former director-general, Mark Thompson, has said something similar. We had issues about, for example, tracking the rise of Euro-scepticism. I plead not guilty to that myself as programme editor of "On the Record" at the time; we did that. But across the BBC, did we do that adequately? No, we

did not. Did we have issues tracking the growth of concern about immigration? I think that we as an organisation did have that.

I hope that we have learned from those experiences and are applying those lessons now to trying to ensure that we understand what people right across the country in every part of the UK think and how they are feeling about politics, the social issues that afflict them and the economic issues that concern them, and reflect those fully in our output.

I would not want to be complacent; it is a constant challenge to make sure that you are confronting yourself with the need to find out what everyone thinks, not just what your own social circle happens to think.

**Baroness Buscombe:** The important thing is that one wants to feel, when you stand back sometimes when you are watching or listening to "BBC News", that rather than just sending out policies that say all the right things, it is about how those policies are put into play.

Anna, I met someone recently who does a lot with Channel 4, and he says that he just cannot say that he was a Brexiteer. This sort of issue is important and I think it has got worse. I would love to say that I thought it had got better, but I think it has got worse across all the news organisations. As David has just said, that is a good challenge for you all.

**Anna Mallett:** Look, I agree with you that diversity of thought is absolutely essential for us to deliver quality impartial news that reflects our audience. I agree with much of what David has said and about the fact that it has to remain a constant challenge. A first step, as we have been discussing, is to ensure that we are recruiting a diverse range of employees at all levels in our newsrooms, those making the decisions, on and off screen.

In terms of making sure that we represent right across the UK, it is important that we have a strong regional basis of correspondents. We do not run ITV's regional news, but we have a very good dialogue with it and we make sure that stories are shared. Channel 4 and Channel 5 have regional correspondents, and I think the opening of Channel 4's hub in Leeds will be very helpful. A really interesting development from Covid is remote working, which obviously enables you to contribute from anywhere. I think that will change a bit how we recruit and will help with some of those diversity issues.

Beyond that, I am not saying that we always get it right, but we have lots of mechanisms in place to check the balance of every programme that we put out. At the end of every programme, we look at the balance of story, the contributors, ethnic diversity and gender. There is a culture of looking at things and challenging them. We have balance-of-voice meetings and editorial feedback meetings. We are really keen for people to feel that they can come and share some different thoughts and perspectives.

One heartening thing is that if you look at the audiences for our news services, you see that we manage to achieve quite a mainstream appeal.

For ITV News, over half the audience is in the C2/D demographic and we have a loyal audience in the north. That is also true to say of Channel 5's news, where we try to resonate across the UK, and "5 News" has a predominantly female audience and a strong share in the Midlands and Yorkshire. "Channel 4 News" is there to appeal to people whatever their culture, nationality or religion, and it has been incredibly successful.

If the Committee tunes into our services tonight, you will find ITV reporting on Covid from the Midlands and flood defences in the West Country, on "Channel 4 News" you will find Andy Davies covering a story in Wales, and on "5 News" you will find reports from Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire and Harwich in East Anglia. So we are trying to get all those voices and stories right across the UK.

Do we always get it absolutely right? I cannot say that we do. Do we challenge ourselves and have open scrutiny and feedback? We try to do that as a constant prerogative and priority.

**Baroness Buscombe:** Thank you, both. My final plea is that in that rich mix of people, do not forget the rural areas, which you have just touched on, Anna. That is so important.

Q184 **The Chair:** One thing that neither witness has touched on is the actual make-up of your newsrooms. You have talked about what you do to ensure impartiality—David talked about curiosity and the highest high editorial standards, and Anna talked about really understanding the stories and reflecting on the different perspectives on them—but the truth is that while John Humphrys did not say that the BBC only read the *Guardian*, he said that the paper that informs the agenda of the day for the BBC is the *Guardian*, and in fact he alleged that the previous director-general had banned the *Daily Mail* from BBC newsrooms.

But that is not the point. The point is that you will only really reflect the UK if your newsroom is made up like the UK, and that includes people from socially conservative backgrounds—broadly as many people who are on the Brexit side of the argument as on the Remain side. You would not say that to you do not need to recruit people from a BAME background because you are going to make sure that you understand everything from their perspective, so why does that not apply to the way people think?

**David Jordan:** I think you make a very important point. It is critical that we get people into the organisation who reflect a whole range of viewpoints. I speak from experience; I was the editor of "On the Record" for 10 years, and people who knew me in that job know that I recruited people from all kinds of political backgrounds to come and work for that programme. We have some very distinguished alumni, including Michael Gove; Gloria di Piero, who was a Labour MP; John Nicolson, who has just returned as an SNP MP; and a whole bunch of other people, including Sir Robbie Gibb, who worked for me and then went off to other distinguished careers in politics. There were others, too, from all kinds of backgrounds, and their politics were known when they came through the door. They

were deliberately recruited to add the perspectives that they could bring to contemporary politics at that time.

It is very, very important that we try to attract people with a huge range of diverse views politically and from diverse backgrounds to bring different views to the organisation. That way, you can ensure that you are producing impartial output; you are just not going to be allowed to get away with saying certain things if there is someone around you who has heard that argument before and can contradict it at the time. So I could not agree with you more; that is an important part of what we do.

The way in which we are trying to diversify at the moment is by taking a lot of our production outside London. We have already done that with 5 Live and breakfast news in Salford. We have a huge range of different output in the nations and different regions of the UK. The director-general has been talking about moving more of our output outside London and hoping to attract different sorts of people into the BBC that way.

It is a two-pronged approach: it is about the way you recruit and who you recruit and making sure that you recruit a range of views and do not recruit into a conventional wisdom, but it is also, as Baroness Buscombe has said, about where you are, making sure that you are bringing people in from all sections and sectors of the community.

**The Chair:** Anna, does that apply to your newsrooms, particularly the room? Do you think your newsrooms reflect in their make-up the diversity of thought in the UK, particularly on the big divisive issues, which sometimes divide the nation 50:50, or do you think that your focus is on making sure that you understand the perspective of those people?

**Anna Mallett:** I agree with what David said: it is important that we have representation from all sorts of different diverse groups, and that includes diversity of thought. The liberal consensus in the media might be a legacy issue in some newsrooms, but we have different approaches, values and perspectives in our newsrooms today, and that is something that we actively look for when we recruit in all our different newsrooms.

**The Chair:** And you do not accept that people who support the leave side of the argument, for example, feel intimidated in the newsroom? You do not feel that you have that culture?

**Anna Mallett:** The culture that I brought in, and which I wanted to bring in as I have become chief executive, is a very open one where people should feel very enabled to share their views and perspectives. We have opened up all sort of different fora where people can feel comfortable doing that. That is absolutely the ambition.

Q185 **The Chair:** Thank you. Let us move on. We have talked about impartiality in a number of ways. One particular area that we have focused on is social media and the way it has changed the role of a journalist and the perception of journalists between their social media context and their on-air context. Lord Allen has been popping in and out.

I am not sure if he is with us right now. If Lord Allen has technically slipped off, I shall ask about that issue.

We have heard evidence about the use of social media by journalists. There seem to be two issues. The first is the way in which complex news stories are articulated on Twitter, with something that in the context of a long, detailed programme may be balanced but as a snapshot on a Twitter screen is not, and by using social media you sometimes lose the balance because of the medium. The second is journalists using social media, but Twitter in particular, to articulate their own opinions. David, do you want to have a go at this first? I know the BBC is looking formally at this.

**David Jordan:** Yes, we are, Chair. We are having a look at the use of social media by the BBC at the moment. The context is that we have guidelines and guidance about both the personal use and the BBC use of social media—that is, official use by BBC correspondents, on-air editors and so on—and we have had that for some considerable time; I think we were probably a leader in that.

That requires people to abide by and uphold our editorial standards when they are on social media such as Twitter, which you rightly identify as the core of the issue here. We hold people to those standards. We may not do so in a very public manner all the time, but I assure you that conversations are had and sometimes disciplinary actions taken when people exceed those standards or do not abide by them in egregious ways. So we have that already.

Having said that, social media is a way of reaching some of the audiences who what you might call legacy broadcasters, traditional broadcasters, have difficulty reaching. I am thinking particularly of the young but also some ethnic minority audiences as well. So it fulfils a function of getting the stories that the BBC has done out to broader audiences while trying to entice people who have seen what we have said on social media to come back to the BBC's output and consume more of it. It is an important tool for us in that respect and it is not something that we want to stop doing.

Having said that, the way that social media has developed in recent times, particularly Twitter, is that it has become more adversarial, argumentative, combative, opinionated, polarised and sometimes actually rather toxic, and it can suck people in. The immediacy of it can be alluring and the live dynamics of it can be—how should I put this?—seductive to some people who find themselves caught up in it, and it can become almost addictive for some of our journalists. We have had issues about the use of social media at the BBC where people have not adhered to our standards or have overstepped the mark.

We want to have a look at this now. We have asked Richard Sambrook, the former director of news at the BBC who is now professor of journalism at Cardiff University, to take a good look at what we are doing and come up with some thoughts about how we should properly use it in

this new atmosphere that we are dealing with on social media and how we can use it to the best advantage of the BBC in future. That is what we will be acting on in the next few months and we are expecting Richard's report in the next month or two.

**The Chair:** That is useful, because it is within the timeframe for our inquiry, so we may ask you to come and talk to us specifically about that in the early autumn.

**David Jordan:** If it is in your timeframe, Chair, I would be delighted to come and talk to you.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That would be appreciated.

**Anna Mallett:** Social media clearly provides a very important platform and, as David has been saying, it is extremely popular with audiences and it is very much here to stay, so how journalists work with social media is incredibly important. There has been a sort of wild west in personal social media, which has been facing all organisations, but it is a particular challenge to the media organisations.

That is why, last autumn, I set our editorial director, Chris Shaw, and John Battle, our head of editorial compliance at ITN, the task of heading up a review of our current guidelines. As David has said of the BBC, we have always had a strong and clear policy, but while it is comprehensive, given the fast pace of these things I felt that it was important to review it and to continue to evolve.

As part of our review we spoke to a large number of people across the business, our key clients and customers, and our staff and teams. I want to say up front that one of the issues is that our journalists suffer a lot of online abuse through trolling while they are simply trying to do their jobs. As I say, there are a number of issues around social media.

Without going into the detail of that review, our answer is pretty simple. Our compliance and editorial standards apply just as much on social media as in any other format. So do not put it on social media if you would not broadcast it; it really is as simple as that. We require our staff to act professionally on social media and to treat others with respect.

The rules apply to all social media that is publicly accessible, whether it is an official account or a personal one. I would add that our rules apply to everyone at every level. It does not matter how senior one is at ITN, they apply to everyone. We have been communicating the policy changes to our staff. We continue to provide training and we hold seminars, because it is about engaging staff and raising consciousness. As with everything, what we always want is for our journalism to be doing the talking.

**The Chair:** This is clearly an area that you are both focused on at the moment by engaging with the issue and dealing with it. We may come back to you later to talk about it further, because it is something that you are understandably concerned about. The next questions are BBC-focused, but if you want to, Anna, feel free to come in on them.

Q186 **Baroness Greender:** Thank you very much for giving evidence today, and congratulations on achieving more than a 50% level of trust in the BBC. That is extraordinary in these challenging times. As ever, though, it means that the microscope is on you at all levels.

I want to explore in particular the local democracy reporter scheme. You will have seen that the Minister is very supportive of it, so it is ironic that I am asking you a very similar question to the one that I asked him about levels of payment that go to the larger players, the NMA members. Again, the big players appear to get the lion's share of the funding. I know that you produced a review at the end of June by Peter Johnson and that there is some talk of broadening out the local democracy reporter scheme to smaller players. How quickly can that come into play?

In written evidence given to us by Professor Steve Barnett, he said that while in theory the competition for these contracts was open to all publishers, the distribution tells a very different story; 140 of the 150 reporter contracts went to the three regional conglomerates, Reach plc, JPI Media and Newsquest, the very publishers that have been consolidating operations and closing papers while protecting their profit base over the last 20 years. I know you have had a review and that it recommends change. How quickly will that change come do you regret the fact that not enough funding has gone to the smaller independent operators?

**Jamie Angus:** Thank you, and I will try to answer that. It is good that you have acknowledged the success of the scheme, which is something that we are very proud about.

There is of course no formal bar in the scheme to smaller independent providers accessing and bidding to employ Local Democracy reporters, but you are right to say that the vast majority are working in the three largest regional groups. In part, that is because those larger groups are able to provide the line management, professional and HR support that is involved when taking on a larger number of staff and overseeing their work.

However, it is also important to note that everything that Local Democracy reporters produce is effectively free to air, if you like; it is not paywall-restricted to one organisation. Other small independent publishers and the BBC itself are able to access the content that is produced in that way. While some smaller publishers may not want to take on the responsibility of having a dedicated LDR within their organisation, they are able to access the content that they produce.

However, I can hear clearly your criticism. David and I listened carefully to what Minister Whittingdale had to say in the previous hour, and this is certainly something that we would like to improve on as the scheme progresses.

On the question of resources, David alluded earlier to the financial pressures that the BBC is under. We do not currently feel able, given the wider pressures on the licence fee, to put more into the LDR scheme. As

the Minister mentioned, in many cases the tech platforms are taking enormous amounts of advertising revenue out of the local journalism system, so at this stage they should be the ones looking at putting in an additional contribution.

**Baroness Grender:** I think you are absolutely right that the BBC going beyond £8 million would be a tall order right now, but there was some scepticism as to whether you can get money out of other operators to fund this scheme. What is the potential for that? In your answer, can you also say whether there is any other start-up local journalism? How do you grow and foster local journalism and other start-ups, aside from this scheme?

**Jamie Angus:** First, the operations of BBC local radio in particular but also our regional newsrooms for television, and some of the things that Anna mentioned, are some of the most resilient things that are sustaining local journalism as a sustainable employer base and a sustainable future model through an incredibly difficult time. That is absolutely what a PSB should be doing: we should be making sure that we hang on in there, and in time a commercial market will improve, return and reform.

I am afraid that the other question is a question for the technology platforms and one that you will doubtless put to them. We have a number of really effective and important collaborations with tech platforms, some of which involve co-financing. In this instance, they have not wished to proceed with funding the LDR scheme, which is regrettable.

**David Jordan:** It is worth mentioning that, as well as the things that Jamie has mentioned, we have massively increased the number of links from our regional stories to local newspaper stories and local media in an effort to show our online readers what they might be able to get from local media that is not BBC-led. We can take a horse to water, as it were, but we cannot make it drink. However, we do our best to ensure that people are aware of what is available from a range of local resources when we do our stories on BBC Online.

**The Chair:** Have you considered going further and reducing the number of stories that you produce yourself at a very local level, in effect turning your website and other media into hubs that direct people straight to local media for stories?

**Jamie Angus:** As David said, we make them available through the LDR scheme and, indeed, through BBC local radio itself, which during the Covid period has made its audio bulletins available to other independent stations just to increase sustainability. We do as much as we can to raise the profile of local papers and local journalism, but it is important to say that audiences for BBC local news sites, and indeed for local radio, are licence-fee payers, and they greatly value those sites and the detail that they can provide.

The extent to which traffic alone is responsible for the difficulties of the commercial sector is part of a much longer discussion. Just to summarise,

the BBC's position is that its activities in local live and local digital do not immediately impact the difficulties of the commercial sector. Rather, they are serving an important licence-fee audience who greatly values the services that we are providing.

**The Chair:** As you say, we could have discussed this at great length. We could also have discussed the World Service, but sadly we have run out of time.

**Jamie Angus:** Not the time, then.

**The Chair:** It is a very important aspect of the BBC's work, obviously. The final question is from the Lord Bishop.

Q187 **The Lord Bishop of Worcester:** Thank you, all three of you, for everything that you have given us this afternoon. In the final question, I want to concentrate attention for a moment or two on BBC News Labs. Could you say something about the most exciting innovations that have come from them? Is their success in bridging the gap between journalists and those who work in research and development?

**Jamie Angus:** Thank you, Bishop. What an excellent question. We are very proud of the quite small but effective team at BBC News Labs. They are operating in a number of really exciting ways for the benefit of BBC audiences and, wherever possible, for other publishers, both national groups and regional publishers; we aim to share the fruit of what we have learned with them.

To give you a few examples, they are very active in the automation of journalism, where appropriate, so particularly through things like speech to text and automated translation. We do auto translation into some of the national languages here in the UK, but also critically, from my point of view, News Labs have done incredible work to automate the production of video that is captured in the 42 languages in which we broadcast around the world.

One other area that is incredibly exciting and important is AI and what we might call news bot technology. Rather than interacting with a rather static web page and a fixed digital story, audiences increasingly want to ask questions to an AI entity, usually on a messaging platform such as Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. We have run News Lab-enabled schemes like that both in the context of UK elections but, crucially for us, in really important national elections of global significance, such as in Nigeria, India and elsewhere in the world.

Those are a couple of examples of where we feel that having our own in-house development lab that is able to convene much wider groups of programmers and digital product development teams from other organisations, and share what we have learned, is a way of reflecting some licence-fee value back to the wider industry.

**The Chair:** Anna, do you want to add anything on that? I know the question is specifically about the BBC, but is there anything you are doing

which you feel is relevant?

**Anna Mallett:** I would just reiterate the point I made earlier, which is that from an operational perspective it has been heroic to see what the technology team here at ITN has done to support our newsrooms to move very quickly to a completely different way of working, because having trusted reliable news available to audiences, particularly during a crisis, is so vital. I think we will take into the future the innovations in remote working and how we can bring it together.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. Sadly, we have run out of time and we are on a very strict timetable. This has been a really important and interesting session. Thank you to the witnesses for what you have said to us and the evidence that you have submitted to us. David, as you offered, we may ask you to come back in the autumn, and perhaps Anna as well, to talk about where you are getting in the work you are doing on social media, and about your understanding of the issues of social media that are presented to you editorially.

There are many other things that we could have talked about. We could certainly have talked at length about the World Service, that very important aspect of the BBC's work; the criticality of PSBs to the wider creative industries; and the importance of news in that, but sadly, as I said, we have run out of time. We appreciate your being with us, Jamie Angus, David Jordan and Anna Mallett. Thank you very much indeed for your time, and we look forward to talking to you again. That concludes this meeting of the Communications and Digital Select Committee. Thank you.